

Cambodia learns lessons of its bloody history

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School Teacher Bin Cheat has already had his lesson on the Khmer Rouge.

As a six-year-old, he saw Pol Pot's army roll into his village in Cambodia's scrappy southern countryside. Fascinated by the rare sight of a car, he trundled up to a tyre as the men stood distracted, unscrewed the cap and let out a hiss of air. Moments later he was dragged and bound, set, like many others, for death by bludgeoning.

"They tied my arms behind my back and stuffed me in a sack. I'm lucky that one of the neighborhood women begged with them for so long that they let me go," Bin Cheat says with a laugh.

Many older Cambodians remember the brutality of the Khmer Rouge. Up to two million people were killed through executions, starvation and forced labour as the ultra-communist regime attempted to create an agrarian utopia, while erasing the history and memory of a people.

For younger generations of children, that forgetting has continued, with the four years of the Khmer Rouge regime left off the school curriculum.

Only now, after years of debate, are teachers like Bin Cheat tentatively beginning to explain Cambodia's full history. The process is delicate and painful, as former Khmer Rouge are spread throughout society, from Prime Minister Hun Sen downwards. Key to that process is a new textbook for high school students, *A History of Democratic Kampuchea (1975-1979)*, produced by the Documentation Centre of Cambodia (DC-CAM), a non-profit organization given the task of recording the history of the genocide.

Other books teach the history up until the Khmer Rouge's rise in 1975 and then fall silent, only to pick up the thread long after the overthrow of the Khmer Rouge in a Vietnamese invasion, explains DC-CAM director Youk Chhang. The one concession granted over the years was a single photo of a seated Pol Pot, accompanied by a brief description of his regime and its genocide.

"I believe in prosecution to reach full forgiveness. But at the same time, for the future, to move beyond the Khmer Rouge, one way to prevent (such things from recurring) is to teach the children," Youk Chhang says.

Conceived in 1996, the idea for the book received only limited in-principle support from the government in 2004 and began being taught in a small number of schools at the end of last year. The plan is to have a million Khmer-language editions of the books in schools by the end of the year, being taught by 3200 teachers.

Re-engaging with the issue is proving a challenge. Of the country's 14 million people, only five million were alive during Khmer Rouge rule. The government of Hun Sen, a former Khmer Rouge cadre who defected to Vietnam and rose to the country's leadership after the regime's 1979 fall, has been at best a reluctant participant in efforts to bring former regime leaders to justice. "The Khmer Rouge aren't just in the government, trust me. They are in the opposition, the NGOs, the private sector, everywhere," he says.

"In the classroom I can assure you that at least 30 per cent are the children of former Khmer Rouge, another 70 per cent are the children of the victims. "Among these 3000 teachers I can assure you almost 25 to 30 per cent are former Khmer Rouge themselves.

"This is a broken society, it is a fragile society, so I think you have to live for the future, commit for the future, teach for the future."

At Bin Cheat's school in Kampong Trach near the southern border with Vietnam, amid a landscape of red earth and lonely palm trees and sheer hills, the Khmer Rouge's shadow stretches longer than in most places.

Throughout the 1990s, Khmer Rouge rebels fighting the government in Phnom Penh lingered in the nearby hills, periodically sweeping down to abduct officials, including local teachers, and holding them for ransoms of rice, food and fuel. Those who were not ransomed were killed.

The students here respond blankly to questions of this recent history. Ny Pagnavuth, 17, says he heard stories of the Khmer Rouge when he was growing up, including vague tales of an uncle and aunt killed. But he knew little of how the Khmer Rouge came to power or why they did what they did, and was shocked to hear the broader story in class.

"I was surprised and I felt it was strange. Why did the regime empty out Phnom Penh? Cities are where industry and the economy grows," he says.